Interview with Donald S. MacDonald

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

DONALD S. MACDONALD

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Initial interview date: January 25, 1990

Q: I hope to concentrate in this interview on your Korean experiences. I know you have done other things, but for these purposes, I would like to focus on Korea. But let's start with your background.

MACDONALD: I have a Ph.D. from George Washington University in political science. I started as chemistry major at MIT, but moved into other areas. My contacts with Korea began with World War II. I volunteered for a tour of duty with the military government with no thought of Korea and was assigned to the Japan occupation forces. Then MacArthur decided that he didn't want a large military government and a number of us were sent to Korea. I arrived there in October, 1945 with virtually no knowledge of the country, spent the next year trying to compensate for my ignorance and since then I have spent much of my life trying to learn what I should have known when I first got there.

Q: Your experience is really the American experience in Korea. You were part of the first major presence in Korea.

MACDONALD: The occupation began on September 9, 1945 when General Hodge and his XXIV Corps landed and took over from the Japanese, who had occupied Korea since 1910. We began with elements of three divisions which were assigned to various parts

of South Korea. As the military government specialists arrived, they were assigned to cities and districts of Korea, initially under the command of the three divisions and then beginning in January, 1946 they came under the direct command of the military governor of Korea, who in turn reported to General Hodge.

Q: As the point man for governing a district, what sort of training did you have?

MACDONALD: The military government operations in the Army had a program which consisted of an initial six week training period at the School for Military Government at the University of Virginia, followed by six months in the Civil Affairs Training School which were located in various parts of the country. They trained people in German and Japanese primarily and the training was specifically aimed at controlling occupied territory behind the fighting lines. As one of the trainees at the CAT School at Harvard, I studied Japanese intensively for six months and had a fairly good crash course in Japanese history, politics and culture. Had I gone to Japan, I would have been moderately well equipped for a beginner, but as far as Korea was concerned, I knew absolutely nothing about it except for a fragmentary recollection of one section in a text-book that I had used at MIT. I arrived on a troop-ship in Yokohama in early October, 1945 and which was subsequently rerouted to Inchon. On the way, a few of us dug out of the ship's library a book entitled “Terry's 1905 Japanese Empire” which had a few pages on Korea. All of the cities had of course Japanese names. We copied that on the ship's typewriter and then mimeographed it. That was the total of our knowledge about Korea when we arrived in Inchon.

Q: How was Korea viewed by us in those days: liberated or occupied?

MACDONALD: We didn't really didn't know. We didn't even know that much. However, in the first few days, we all recognized that Korea was a friendly country and not an enemy. We realized this because 90% of the Koreans were friendly. There were a few who were committed Communists, who viewed the occupation askance. We had some problems with them, but generally speaking the atmosphere was very friendly. It is ironic,

of course, that the Japanese, who were the defeated enemy. Governed themselves under the general direction of MacArthur and his headquarters, whereas the Koreans who were our friends were governed directly by an American Military Government, with Americans directly in charge down to the county level in the beginning.

Q: What rank were you then?

MACDONALD: I came as a lieutenant and left as a captain.

Q: Do you have any sense why it is that we decided on a military government rather than the Japanese model?

MACDONALD: As I look back on it, I am not sure the issue was given much thought. I was strictly at the working level and had no policy responsibility, but we must have recognized that someone had to run the country. Once the Americans had decided not to accept the People's Republic which had been proclaimed two days before we arrived, then who else except the Americans? The process then established was that the military government would be imposed as a transitional phase. The Japanese who had governed the country were sent home. They were to be replaced at the lower levels by Korean bureaucrats who had worked for the Japanese. That was a poor decision, but at the American working level it seemed sensible at the time.

Q: You were first assigned to Kwangju (capital of South Cholla province). What was the situation when you arrived?

MACDONALD: When we got to Kwangju, we found the Japanese provincial government rivaled by a local Korean government, manned by volunteers operating just down the street from Japanese headquarters. We didn't know at the time, but found out subsequently that the Japanese Governor General, in the last days of occupation, recognized that his life and fortune and those of his people, would be at risk once the surrender had taken place. So the Japanese Governor General invited a Korean

nationalist leader of leftist persuasion to organize a security group, which within a couple of months became the self-proclaimed People's Republic, nominally created by the local committees. In Kwangju, the committee ran a security apparatus with the acquiescence of the Japanese. The Japanese didn't realize how far they would go. The Koreans were after all amateurs at government since they had been ruled by the enemy for forty years. The situation therefore in Kwangju was confused, but not personally threatening. We all arrived with Colt 45s on our belts, although I would hardly have known which end to fire, if I had to. A curfew was imposed which the Americans assisted the Korean police to enforce. Within a very short time, the Americans reconstituted the police force established by the Japanese. We used many of the same Korean personnel who had worked for the Japanese and they did maintain order in their own fashion.

The first month or two were a learning experience for all of us. We began by interviewing our Japanese ex-opposite numbers. My most hilarious experience came when I was made the interpreter between the American provincial public safety officer and the Japanese chief. The latter quickly recognized that my Japanese was inadequate, so he brought in a high school principal to do the interpreting. But the public safety officer couldn't understand the principal's English. So the police chief would speak to the high school principal, who spoke to me and I would interpret his English to the American public safety officer.

Q: You mentioned a People's Republic. Was this a Soviet inspired government?

MACDONALD: That was the big unresolved question in the minds of all of the Americans in Korea, including those of us in Kwangju. It was a burning question because these people's committees, which were the grass-roots organizations which produced the People's Republic, were in control of many parts of the province—in fact, most of it. The only thing that was left under Japanese control when we arrived was the provincial capital itself and the immediate surrounding areas. The question of what to do with people's committees had to be faced. Should they be brought into the occupation governmental structure and if so, how? Some of the committees were allowed to operate for several

months, but because of orders from Seoul or because of local decisions, they were eventually abolished, some by use of considerable force. The last one that was abolished in our province was in Mokpo in January, 1946. These “eradications” were performed by running in armored personnel carriers in a big show of force, informing the people's committees that they had been abolished and arresting some members as necessary. This decision was largely based on Seoul's appraisal that these committees were largely communist dominated. In fact, they were not. Bruce Cuming's book, “The Origin of the Korean War,” for which he did a thorough research job, more or less demonstrates that although the communists were probably the best organized element within the people's committees and may have inspired such ideas as the name “People's Republic”, actually the people's committees were associations of local notables in the various communities. They were not necessarily communists. As Cumings points out, the American method of dealing with them was based on a firm anti-communist position. “He who is not for us, is against us”. Or since the committees had communist elements in them, they were therefore subject to communistic subversion and manipulation. They therefore were to be abolished and the military government would work with people in whom it had confidence as good anti-communists.

Q: What was your feel about the political situation at the time?

MACDONALD: In retrospect, I am absolutely appalled not only by my initial lack of information about the political situation, but also by my insensitivity to it during most of the time I was there. Things were going on, but I did not really learn about them until much later. But at the time, I was almost blissfully oblivious to them.

Q: Having been an enlisted man in both Japan and Korea during this period, I had the same experience. How did you establish the government of Kwangju?

MACDONALD: The first step was to interview the Japanese. Following that, the Americans took over what the Japanese had been doing, as provincial governor and heads of the six

major subdivisions and of all the police. The next step was to dismiss all the Japanese and to install Korean personnel who had worked in the Japanese-led Korean government. This resulted in a continuation of the structure established by the Japanese Governor General with Japanese-trained Koreans in positions of authority. Then we, at least in name, turned the authority over to the Koreans. The Governor of South Cholla province, who was initially named, was a moderate physician who had been associated with the People's Committee. He was soon displaced by a Korean landowner who was famous for his conservative anti-Communist views and who spoke English very well and who was therefore attractive to the anti-Communist Americans. Under him, and a few other top people brought in from outside, continued all these ex-Japanese Government General Korean employees. What was done in effect was to continue the Japanese structure.

Q: In regard to American insensitivity to a very complex situation, were there any local protests?

MACDONALD: The protests were sometime very vigorous. There was a major strike in a large coal mine near Kwangju, at Hwasun, which was something of a national cause celebre. It was believed that the Communists had fermented the strike to make trouble for the American Military government. They probably did encourage it, but that was only one factor. There were parades and counter-parades, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. There was not any mass violence that I could see. Kwangju, although tense with big demonstrations, did not at that time have the upheavals that took place in Taegu—the third largest city in South Korea—in 1946, which was repeated in Kwangju in 1980.

Q: Were you getting many instructions from General Hodges' headquarters in Seoul?

MACDONALD: In the first three months, while under divisional authority, we were left pretty much on our own. The commander of the 6th Division which occupied our province, did not have his mind very much on military government. He left the management of the

province to the military government people. Beginning in January 1946, that changed when Hodge took over the military government function. The first thing that happened was that the police, which had been decentralized to the provincial level, was re-centralized, as the Japanese had it. We in Kwangju did not really support this change. After that, the Navy Commander who became senior political advisor to General Hodges because he spoke Korean—he was the son of missionaries—came to Kwangju and called a meeting of American officers to brief us on plans to hold elections for a legislative assembly throughout South Korea in 1946. Increasingly, government administration became centralized. This posed a problem because instructions would come down through Korean channels from the Korean civil administrator in Seoul to the Koreans in our province. We didn't read Korean. Other instructions would come down in English from the military governor to the senior military government officer who was by then considered an advisor to the Korean provincial governor. These sets of instructions didn't always mesh. That created a great deal of confusion in an already confused situation.

Q: What were your main priorities at the time?

MACDONALD: To maintain order and restore public services. The situation was dreadful at the time. One of the first acts by the American military government with its blissful faith in free private enterprise had been to abolish all of the Japanese control on markets, which led to the hoarding of a bumper crop of rice by speculators which resulted in a massive rise in the cost of rice, which is the basic Korean staple. All other commodities were also in short supply. There wasn't any soap. In the first weeks of occupation, we were typing our reports to Seoul on Japanese toilet paper—we didn't even have American supplies. Just to provide the bare essentials under these circumstances took a lot of ingenuity, which was applied generously and with some success. Incidentally, there is an almost forgotten set of articles on this period in a book published by Carl Friedrich and Associates called “American Military Government Experience in World War II”. It has a couple of chapters on Korea—one which I wrote. When our performance is measured strictly in terms of day-to-

day coping, we did fairly well. But in terms of over-all policy, Americans are open to a great deal of criticism.

Q: What about the Korean police? Were they excessively cruel?

MACDONALD: Strange to say, I had no personal direct impression on that question. One of the things that happened—I was assigned to the Public Safety Office staff along with two other American officers—was that the Korean police would brief me from time to time and give me a complete “snow job”. I loved them. I did occasionally inspect what was being done. I never saw anything out of line. I can't personally testify to any human rights abuses, but in the light of what I learned subsequently about Korea, I have absolutely no doubt that abuses were committed every day right under my nose. Of course, what Americans and Koreans viewed as abuses were quite different.

Q: When did your first tour of Korea end?

MACDONALD: October, 1946. I stayed one year. Before we finish with that part of my life, let me mention one episode, which I find revealing. The commander of the military government in charge of Kwangju, as distinguished from the provincial team to which I was attached, was a major Dillon who had no doubt about the superiority of Americans over all others. He was sitting in his office one day—this comes to me from a very good second hand source—and a delegation of Koreans came in, unannounced. They had a nominee for the Korean mayor of Kwangju. Dillon drew himself up to his full five feet, five inches height and said in a firm tone: “Mayor? You must be kidding. We came here to kill all you people!”

Q: That shows the sophistication of some of our own.

MACDONALD: There was a complete spectrum, of course, in the American representation. Most of the people who occupied Korea were people of basic good will and good intentions but certainly ethnocentric. I can remember very clearly that my political

belief at the time was that man was by nature democratic, as we were in the U.S. All that was necessary to provide democracy to Korea was to remove the Japanese. Once they were gone, the Koreans would of course be democratic because that is the essential nature of man. It wasn't until considerably later that I realized that it wasn't quite that simple.

Q: You came into the Foreign Service and were assigned to Korean language training. Did you want to return?

MACDONALD: I took the Foreign Service entrance examination on the troop ship coming home. I never thought I would pass it. When I was accepted in the Foreign Service, I did volunteer for Korea because they were at the time looking for people willing to go there. I felt my ignorance acutely and I was interested in returning. I loved the country; I had enjoyed my year there very much. It turned out later that this Korean training program had been set up by George McCune, who was at that time in charge of Korean affairs. He was a historian, the off-spring of missionaries. He had successfully argued for at least a pilot program for Korean language officers. Against considerable opposition, he managed to get three positions. So when they asked for volunteers, I was one of the three and received about eight months of Korean language training, returning to Korea in Summer, 1948.

Q: Did your perspective on Korea improve through the language training?

MACDONALD: It was primarily language training. George McCune, who was by then at the University of California and in very poor health—he died shortly thereafter—and his wife gave us a course on Korean history, along with the language program. So I did have a better feel for Korea when I returned for a second tour. Even then, I was still terribly ignorant not only about Korea, but also about politics in general. After all, my MIT training had been in chemistry and business administration, and except for the one year in Korea, my horizon had been the trucking business and civil engineering. It wasn't until I returned

to Korea as a rotational junior officer that I had the opportunity to do political reporting. It was only then that I began to find out what was going on.

Q: When you returned to Korea in June, 1948, what was the situation?

MACDONALD: It was still very confused. It was marginally better than when I had left. Politically it was complicated by the split between the right and left. There were many demonstrations. There had been a couple of major assassinations before I got there. But the situation was not one that put in me in fear for my life and limb. We moved around freely. The bulk of the population were friendly. A lot of people were complaining about what they thought we were failing to do. I arrived right after the May 10 election which took place under UN supervision and which set up the Constituent Assembly. Therefore there was a certain amount of hope in the air along with fear of events in North Korea. One problem at the time was that the North Koreans on May 15, had pulled the switch on the electric power; the north was the primary source of power for the whole peninsula. In terms of creature comforts, that created some difficulties. Living was poor particularly for the Koreans.

Q: How did Ambassador Muccio operate?

MACDONALD: Actually, I arrived before he did. The military was still in control. The Military Governor, General Dean, had two advisors: Joseph Jacobs, a political advisor who was a dyed-in-the-wool arch-conservative and Arthur Bunce as economic advisor who was a dyed-in-the-wool New Deal liberal. The two of them hated each other and were giving more or less contradictory advice to General Dean. The State Department was a presence but not an authority. The only thing it really did was consular work.

Before independence came, Muccio arrived in July or August 1948. An American mission to Korea was established then with four parts: diplomatic, economic aid section, Korean military advisory group and a huge administrative service group which in effect ran a small city because we could not rely on the Korean economy for anything. My impression was

that Muccio ran this mission quite well. He was ably assisted by Everett Drumright. They didn't see eye-to-eye politically, but they were a good team to run the ship.

Q: What were their political differences?

MACDONALD: It was similar to the Jacobs-Bunce differences. Muccio was a Truman appointee, a life-long Democrat from Providence, R.I. and Drumright was a China hand who had been very much in the anti-communists camp. He had come from Drumright, Oklahoma. They just had different political perspectives.

Q: What was the role of the U.S. military at the time?

MACDONALD: The military really did turnover its authority. The Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947 had decided that they were going to pull out all the military out of Korea because they were needed in Europe. The military, in a sense, could not wait to get home. There was nothing in Korea that attractive for them. Technically, although the Koreans achieved independence on August 15, 1948 and the Republic of Korea was proclaimed, the initial and property settlement, which transferred the real authority, was not effective until September. There was considerable bargaining over that settlement between the two sides. The U.S. Army Forces in Korea headquarters pulled out in January, 1949, leaving a regimental combat team at the insistence of the Koreans, not at ours. That team pulled out at the end of June, 1949. After the first few months, the military had no official role in representing US views. It is true that President Rhee enjoyed playing the military against the civilians. He could frequently get military sympathy for his diatribes against the State Department which he considered a bunch of communists. In that sense, there was a slight dual line, which really didn't count for much until the Korean War because the military presence was so small.

Q: How did you and your colleagues view Rhee' government?

MACDONALD: By the time Rhee took over, he had made most of the Americans mad at him. He had a propensity for making all who had worked with him, mad at him. It was extraordinary. He had a single minded conviction of his own unique attributes and qualifications to be able to do anything. This was by no means un-Korean, but he exceeded most Koreans. It was he actually who had insisted on a separate government for South Korea when the Koreans were still hoping for a unified government of the peninsula. Rhee knew how to manipulate Americans and did so. He was stubborn and mule-headed; he had an aura as the leading nationalist patriot fighter for Korea's independence. He made Americans quite miserable. None of us liked him although we had some respect for his ability. Furthermore he became increasingly dictatorial. This turned off the junior members of the staff, particularly. I remember vividly trying to include all the criticisms I had heard in my dispatches, which Drumright took out, saying: “Young man, it is your business to report what happened, but not to pontificate”.

Q: Did you see the coming of the war of June 25, 1950 or was it a surprise?

MACDONALD: The outbreak was a complete surprise. It was not that we thought that there would be no war. There had been elaborate emergency plans drawn up, which were actually followed when war broke out. But for one thing, we were encouraged by the military advisory group to over-estimate South Korean military capabilities. We also underestimated the capacity of the North Koreans. Although the threat was obviously there, it was discounted. Also President Rhee had been crying “wolf” for so long that when in May, 1950 he and his defense minister began to cite movement of tanks and troops, we dismissed it as an effort to get more military assistance. We were concerned that he would move North; after all, he was always talking about it. Even though we recognized the threat and were planning for the eventuality of a war, when it actually happened it was a total surprise.

Q: Before we get to the War, let me ask about the role of the missionaries?

MACDONALD: The missionaries returned to Korea beginning in early 1946. But the one that first came back to Kwangju was more a property custodian to save missionary property. The missionaries had been sent out by the Japanese in 1940. There was also an Irish Catholic father who had been in a concentration camp during the War and who returned to Kwangju to take over the Catholic parish. It was he who recommended to the military government the Korean who was named Police Chief. At the national level, although I didn't observe it personally, it was quite clear from my reading since then, that missionaries played a very important role in influencing the military government's decisions on which Koreans were trustworthy and what policies to follow. When I returned in 1948, there were a number of missionaries back in residence. They had mostly picked up where they had left off and they were an important aspect of the American presence. They controlled some aid that came through private channels; they were assisting in the reorganization of the Protestant and Catholic communities; they were reopening educational institutions which was important at a time when the public educational system was just restarting. Their role in the 1945-50 period, although significant, was not a deciding one.

Q: Did you have many dealings with Korean government officials?

MACDONALD: Yes. Once I started doing political reporting, I was in touch with government people, but I tended to work through the Embassy's Korean political assistants more than by direct contact. For one thing, my Korean was still inadequate for conducting business. We all tended to distrust the government anyway. We preferred to go to newsmen, opposition politicians and others to try to get information on what was going on in the country, leaving government official contacts to our seniors.

Q: Was this process acceptable to Muccio and Drumright? They were not creatures of the Rhee government?

MACDONALD: The contact with the government was carried on more by the senior officers. The junior officers tended to be in touch with these other sources. A considerable number of the government officials spoke English and therefore had contacts at social occasions. The clearest evidence that the Americans were not captive of Rhee's government was the episode of April/May 1950 when the Americans under Washington direction and on the recommendation of Ambassador Muccio, issued an aide-memoire to the Korean government informing them that unless they improved their financial management process and unless they held the elections, scheduled for May 1950, on time, the United States would review its economic assistance policies.

Q: What did you personally do when the North Koreans attacked?

MACDONALD: The first word that I received about the War was a telephone call on Sunday morning, June 25, from Everett Drumright. I was in bed asleep. He said: “Macdonald, we have a little emergency. You'd better get to the office”. I went and never did get home very much thereafter. The first matter to attend to was to determine whether the invasion was for real. There had been many skirmishes at division level at the front since 1949; it was never completely clear which side started these incidents. Therefore we had to establish the veracity of the reports of the North Korean attacks. It wasn't until Monday that we actually heard gunfire. Events progressed more or less according to plan for the first day. We started to segregate classified documents for destruction. We organized people in civil defense ways by designating air raid shelters, appointed wardens, arranged communications and so on. As it became increasingly clear that the South Korean Army was not going to hold, then matters got increasingly frantic. We were burning classified documents on the roof of the Embassy steadily for two or three days. Some of the Marine guards and junior officers were assigned to that detail.

Meanwhile, we of course still had to write reports. Ambassador Muccio personally had to hold the hand of the Korean government. The first group to be evacuated consisted of dependents—women and children. They left Sunday night and were put on board a

fertilizer boat which had just been ordered to dump its cargo overboard to make room for them. That group left for Japan. The next group consisted of non-essential employees and finally everybody left except a group of volunteers that the Ambassador had requested. I was one of those. I wasn't a personal witness, but there seems to be no doubt that there was a disgraceful episode at plane-side Tuesday morning when some of our senior officials were elbowing each other out of the way to get on the plane first with their hunting rifles, their electronic gear and whatever other things that they had taken fancy to and had therefore had to go along with them. It was a mess.

I got home long enough to help my wife pack up one trunk locker and got her off. After that I returned home once before I left with Ambassador Muccio. My last act was to go back to the Embassy on Tuesday afternoon to check it out to make sure that everybody had left. The only person that was left was Victor Loftus, the finance officer, who was responsible for $10,000 in gold bars that he couldn't find. I don't know when he left, but he did get out eventually. By Tuesday afternoon, the gunfire was clearly audible. That afternoon, around 4 PM, I drove out of Seoul in the Ambassador's car. He was driving it because he didn't want to leave it for the Communists. We drove to Suwon, where a temporary headquarters had been set up, both for the small Embassy team and the military group that was being assembled for assessment purposes.

Q: What happened after that?

MACDONALD: In Suwon, we were essentially supporting the military and trying to report the situation to Washington using “one time pads”—a coded tear-off pad. These were the days before sophisticated electronics. I remember making a bed for General MacArthur to sleep in case he decided to sleep overnight, which he did not. We set up our headquarters in a former agriculture school that had been built by the Japanese. I can vividly remember General Church, who was the leader of the first reconnaissance party from Tokyo, after looking at maps and listening to reports for several hours, saying: “No one knows where anybody is!”. It was in that climate then that on Thursday or Friday someone yelled

that the North Koreans were coming. One of the communication technicians threw a thermite grenade at the communications gear to destroy it and thereby set fire to the entire building, which had been built with well seasoned wood. It burned immediately. We then set off in the middle of the night for Taejon, where the next temporary headquarters was established. In Taejon, there was little need for normal Embassy work. So I typed intelligence reports for the 24th Division G-2 until I was asked to make a trip through the rest of South Korea to make sure that all the missionaries were evacuated. General Dean asked me also to find two missing soldiers who he had heard had been in Kunsan—a very touching example of his concern. I ascertained that soldiers had gotten out. I did a “Paul Revere ride” around the various missionary headquarters and told them to leave. I wound up finally in Pusan. I never returned to Taejon because in the meantime the 24th Division was defeated and had to fall back to Taegu. Eventually, I found myself in Taegu where Drumright was in charge of a forward Embassy echelon. Muccio was in Pusan in charge of a rear echelon. Drumright spent most of his time checking up and reporting on the military situation. Muccio was pending his time calming President Rhee and doing what he could to stabilize the situation there.

I should emphasize that history has not been fair to John Muccio in recognizing what he did single-handedly to hold the situation together between June 25, when the war started, and June 28, when the Security Council called upon the North Koreans to withdraw and the Americans began to get involved. In that period, the Koreans were left in total doubt about American intentions. It became quickly clear to them that their Army was not going to hold. Muccio managed somehow or other to instill enough confidence into the Korean government so that when American assistance arrived in the form of air cover and eventually ground troops, what could be saved was saved. It was very difficult, but had Muccio not taken that firm positive reassuring stance, based on very little evidence, the situation would have been much worse.

Q: What happened after Taegu?

MACDONALD: Harold Noble has published a book, called “Embassy at War” which chronicles day-to-day what happened, and he cites one hilarious staff meeting in which I announced that I wasn't doing enough in this perilous hour and if the Embassy couldn't give me something to do, I would volunteer for active military duty—I was a reserve officer at the time. Partly because of that, they sent me on a mission to North Korea just after word of the Chinese intervention had reached us. They wanted me to stand on the railroad track running down into Sinanju which was then close to the fighting. I was to interview refugees to see whether they were really refugees or “fifth column” troops being sent to the rear of the UN command. I spent a few very cold days doing that.

Somewhat later, just before the fall of Pyongyang, a team from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the State Department, headed by Richard Scammon, arrived to go to Pyongyang for interviews and examination of captured documents. This was an effort to understand how the Soviet Union had operated in North Korea. This led to a Departmental report called “A Case Study in Communist Take-over”. I was sent along as a hat-holder and logistics officer. When the team left, I decided to stay for a while because there wasn't much else to do, and the commander of the American military government team in Pyongyang was an officer for whom I had worked before, during my military government training. I joined him until orders to evacuate were received. The colonel told me to leave first because he didn't want to take responsibility for me. Actually, we spent a night in a school house on the way out. An ammunition dump, which was right next door, exploded and dumped the wall of the school right on us. That is the closest I came to being a war casualty.

Q: I gather that the Embassy didn't really have much to do in this kind of a situation.

MACDONALD: There wasn't much we could do. Furthermore, once the American military arrived, then they virtually took over Korea again. The 1947 situation was almost reconstituted. Now it was called the “Korean Civil Assistance Command”. To a considerable extent, it displaced the Korean government in key areas, with the exception

of education and social affairs. Even in these areas, there was American involvement. Therefore, there wasn't much that the Korean government could do either. They were reduced to a small pocket of South Korea. The rest of the country was under communist control. It was really a holding operation until the fortunes of war changed, which eventually they did.

Q: You were reassigned before then?

MACDONALD: I left Korea on December 17, 1950 on the last commercial flight out of Seoul. I was assigned to Istanbul as a rest tour where I stayed until 1953. While in Istanbul, I applied for Japanese language and area training to try to complete what I started in the Army. I did in fact do a year at Harvard with Professor (later Ambassador) Reischauer. Then the Foreign Service Institute asked me to reconstitute an area and language study program which had been decimated during the McCarthy era. In fact, the Institute itself barely survived. Therefore my training was interrupted. In the meantime, Drumright found out that I was in town and announced the FSI project was a waste of time and that he needed me in Korea. So back to Korea it was.

Q: You were in Seoul then from 1955 to 1958?

MACDONALD: Right. When I first arrived back in Seoul, both the Korean government and the Embassy had just recently returned. The city was still under UN military control to some extent. My wife couldn't join me for six months because of that. The situation was bleak. Seoul was a wasteland. It had been heavily damaged during the war. Nothing was going on. Life was grim. Reconstruction efforts were just beginning, but they were in their early stages. The political situation was awful because during the war, there had been a constitutional crisis in which Rhee clobbered the opposition in order to stay in power. When I started doing political reporting in May, 1955 the opposition forces were just emerging into a single opposition party which was a somewhat of a threat to Rhee's Liberal Party. Korean politics were beginning to jell, but they also began to be polarized

even more. Although there was a period of relative freedom from mid-55 to the latter part of 1957, the storm clouds were already evident. A group of hard-liners around Rhee were beginning to sharpen their swords and aim their guns against the opposition to keep their power, by the time I was leaving Korea. Although the lines were not entirely clear, they were leading to the dreadfully fraudulent election of 1960.

Q: What contacts did you have with the opposition?

MACDONALD: That was my main assignment. The problem with Korean politics was they had only a scant text-book acquaintance with the practice of modern democratic government. There is nothing in the Korean culture that would have prepared for this kind of government. The opposition leaders at the time had to live by their wits because they had unreliable sources of financial support, were very much creatures of their culture. Their basic drive was to throw Rhee out and take power. My impression was that the whole strategy was based on a conspiracy to acquire power, not the consequences of acquiring such power. They would take care of that when they got to it.

Q: Who were these opposition leaders? Provincial leaders?

MACDONALD: Korean politics at that time was a congeries of small groups of leaders and supporters. A man who aspired to political fame would collect supporters who might have been former students, associates, people who lived in his hometown, etc. These leaders and their followers would try to get together to build some kind of organization. The organization was always uncertain because they were constantly vying for supremacy. The regions, although part of the support structure, were not important as such. Kim Sung Soo, for example, the democratic leader who at one point actually became vice-president during the war, was from South Cholla province and this was recognized. Many of his followers were from the same province; it was recognized that people from that province had the inside track with him. On the other hand, another political leader, Chang Myon, came from North Korea and although his supporters tended to be North Koreans, his

power was not based on that but on his individual relationships with his supporters. This was true of all of the political leaders. In theory it would have been possible to build a support structure on another basis than regionalism. Fellow graduates from Seoul National University or from a Japanese University or any affinity group like that could have become a political group. The provincial differences and parochial concerns were recognized, but were not dominant in political affairs at that time. They had become so only in recent years.

Q: What about the Korean military? Were they a factor?

MACDONALD: Very much so. The first indicator of this was the assassination in 1956 of a general who rejoiced in the sobriquet of “Snake” Kim, who was in charge of the Army CIC and was viewed as a source of information for President Rhee on what went on in the military. His assassination was a cause celebre. During all of Rhee's tenure, however, the military did not have much direct political clout. They had power because they had their own economic establishment. They had to make a living and so they were engaged in mining, trucking and other enterprises which they used for welfare and personal enrichment. In that sense they were a factor. When Rhee wanted to straighten out problems at a Korean coal mine, he called a general who took care of them. Rhee was quite skillful in manipulating his generals. As soon as one got too big for his boots, he would be reassigned abroad or promoted upstairs. Rhee had an interesting advisor, Jim Housman, a former US Army major who lived in Korea from 1947 to 1976. He knew every Korean military person intimately. Through Housman, Rhee was able to get an objective fix on what was going on. With Rhee's political instincts and with sources like “Snake” Kim and Housman, he was essentially able to keep the military out of politics.

Q: How did the Embassy view Rhee during this period?

MACDONALD: He had gotten worse. During this period, 1955-58, there was a large American military presence. There was some rivalry between the four-star general who

was the Commander-in-Chief of the US command and had a large aid mission and the American Ambassadors, both Briggs and Dowling. In between these two, we had William Lacy who had a hilarious three months tenure as Ambassador and Rhee kicked him out. The rivalry between military and civilian was recognized by Rhee and he played on it assiduously. The military were jealous of their position and although by any rational approach the AID mission should have been under the Embassy, in fact, it remained under the UN Commander-in-Chief until 1959.

Q: How did the Ambassador operate in this situation?

MACDONALD: It depended on the personal relationship between the Ambassador and the CINC. Dowling clearly recognized the problem and worked on it. He was successful with some and not with others. The issue was manageable but particularly during the war years there were some dreadful misunderstandings and foolishnesses that went on with the aid program and the rivalries between the AID mission, the US forces and the UN people. At one time, they were engaged in a turf battle that took a special mission from Washington to straighten out. The turf battles were a pure American concern, but the Koreans played on it.

Q: Were the military people living on a better scale than others so that it caused resentment in the American civilian community?

MACDONALD: I wouldn't say so. I don't think any of us worried about the way the military were living. The Korean military did. One of the factors in the coup d'etat of 1961 apparently was the jealousy of the younger Korean officers of the “gravy train” they perceived their senior generals to be riding. They had American nick-names; they used the 8th Army golf course; they had back-door access to the PX and so on. The younger officers transmuted the jealousy into anti-Americanism. Therefore, in terms of US-Korean relationships, it was a real issue. We had thousands and thousands of Korean enlisted men that worked alongside the American military men as KATUSAs (Korean

Augmentation to the US Army). These soldiers were in Korean uniform but assigned to US Army components and treated essentially as US troops, except for pay and allowances. There were good and bad things about this policy.

Personally, I didn't feel that my life-style was any worse than that of an American officer. Actually, given the conditions of an underdeveloped country, we lived quite well.

Q: Did you have any restraints on your reporting?

MACDONALD: No. There was a very interesting period in 1957. This was not too long after Walter Dowling arrived as Ambassador. In the initial briefings, the political staff told him that things were not as nice as they seemed; that there were all kinds of social problems developing, which would come to a head unless some actions were taken. It could become a mess. Dowling encouraged me to write a despatch putting all of this down on paper. I can remember one of the Assistant Secretaries getting this briefing and being completely horrified. He couldn't believe it. After all, Rhee was in charge and he was a good anti-communist. Dowling didn't suppress any of this reporting; he encouraged it.

Q: After leaving Korea, you were assigned to Far East personnel office from 1958 to 1960. Then you became officer-in-charge of Korean Affairs from 1960-62. How did you find the Washington perspective when you took over the desk?

MACDONALD: One of the first things I had to do was to participate in writing a national policy paper on Korea. This was at the very end of the Eisenhower Administration. My experience in Korea had persuaded me that the old-fashioned, free enterprise, representative democracy approach was simply not going to be effective in Korea. Furthermore, I had become aware, during a six month tour at Harvard, that the thinking about underdeveloped countries such as Korea in the academic community was far ahead of the anachronistic thinking in the State Department. I tried to get some of the academic views into the policy paper. I didn't really succeed except that I managed to persuade them to include a report that Max Millikan at MIT had made to the Senate

Foreign Relations Committee during the period when Senator John Kennedy was asking for such contributions. Of course, no one paid any attention to it. We were then in the period following Rhee's toppling by the student revolution. We were in Chang Myon's parliamentary democracy period. I was persuaded from the beginning that it wasn't going to work.

Q: Is that what the Embassy's reporting reflected? Or was it your gut instinct?

MACDONALD: Both. The reporting from the Embassy at that time tended to be euphoric. They had suffered through the end of the Rhee regime and the lid had finally come off on Korea and everything was great. I worried about it and in the Fall of 1960, a man whom I greatly respected who was the publisher of an independent newspaper, Chang Key Young, passed through Washington. He was muttering darkly about how bad things were and predicted that there would be an upheaval unless something happened. After receiving that report and a couple of other similar ones, I began to worry about the possibility of some kind of coup. Therefore, in January 1961, I sent an instruction to the Embassy asking it to appraise the possibility of a military coup. I also asked whether and what we should do about it. The answer was: “Don't worry about a thing”. Of course, the coup came in May, 1961.

Another interesting event during this period was that the man who stood out above all others in Chang Myon's Cabinet was the Minister of Finance, Kim Young-Sun. He started right in to develop a five-year plan. The idea of a five-year economic development plan was not new. Earlier a few people, inspired by Rhee's Finance Minister, Song In-Sang, had started work on such a plan, but it didn't receive any high level attention. The Americans at that time were not thinking in terms of five-year plans because they were considered socialistic. When Kim Young-Sun took over, he directed some American-trained economists to work up a five year plan. In due course, it was submitted to the US government for comment. The State Department's attitude was that the five-year plan was socialistic; it was crude, thrown together, and was not useful. I had particular trouble

with the Economic Bureau in State. I felt that this was not the right answer. I managed to persuade State to employ a developmental economist from the Rand Corporation to review the Korean plan. I had a session with him during which I explained that I thought the plan had symbolic importance beyond the nuts-and-bolts of the econometrics. He did a critique of the five-year plan in which he agreed that it was a good beginning. But then the military coup came. The military immediately co-opted the plan and refined it further. It became the first Five-Year Plan, effective in 1962, that helped turn Korea around. There was also new competence and new discipline.

Q: The coup came May, 1961. The Embassy had not predicted it. How did Washington and Seoul react?

MACDONALD: We got a “Critic” message, which is the highest priority. It came in at the end of the day in Washington with only a bare announcement. I spent a good part of that night trying to find out what was going on. It was a difficult period because John Kennedy had just taken over. He had other things on his mind besides Korea. There had been an interesting development. A man by the name of Foley, who had been the Deputy Administrator of the aid mission in Korea, had mounted a crusade against what he viewed as galloping corruption in the economic aid program. He resigned his position and had returned to Washington to launch a crusade to “clean house”. Several of us persuaded him to do this through proper channels instead of setting fires. He got President Kennedy to set up a task force on Korean corruption. The fact that this task force was in existence and that corruption was only one symptom of a much broader problem meant that when the coup came, there was a Presidentially-appointed group already in being, which could quickly focus on this new problem. However, the other side was that the Assistant Secretary of State then in charge, Walter McConaughy, was still an Eisenhower hold-over. He had been ambassador in Korea. He was uncertain which way to go. His contacts in the new Administration were also uncertain. When I went to him to beg him to make a decision on what was to be done, he hemmed and hawed and for three days we did nothing. During that period, Marshall Green, then in Korea, made himself somewhat

of a hero by taking a position in support of the Chang government and standing firm with very little authority behind him. My judgment at the very beginning was that the time for supporting democratic principles had long passed. My view of the situation was that the Korean people in general were relieved that someone who knew what needed to be done had taken over.

Q: Did we know who was taking over and that they knew what to do?

MACDONALD: We thought in the beginning that Park Chung Hee was a communist. Indeed one of his senior officers told us that. That got very high level attention in Washington. It was only over the course of time that their competence became evident. Park Chung Hee worked with the Americans, not because he loved us, not because he was necessarily a free enterprise capitalist, but because he recognized that in order to consolidate his coup and his control over the country, he would have to have American support. So he somewhat grudgingly went along. The man who had been selected as the new Ambassador was Samuel Berger. He had been in the political outhouse for several years because he had crossed swords with Nixon. He had been in Wellington and Athens as labor officer. He was brought back into the fold and named Ambassador to Korea. This was a brilliant decision by Kennedy because Berger had a labor movement background, he was an economist, he was a man who knew where he stood and had no inhibitions about getting things done. As soon as Berger returned on consultation and saw the Presidential task force, he took it over. He got the task force to write him his instructions as Ambassador. The opinion, which I shared from the beginning. Prevailed that it was hopeless to try to support the Chang Myon government. We had to work with the new group. They were in and there was nothing we could do about it.

Q: Had you then written off the Chang Myon government as an effective force?

MACDONALD: Not quite. Chang's administration in March and April 1961 had began to show signs of life. They had began to face the problems confronting them. One of the

mistakes that Chang Myon made at the beginning was to be too complacent in accepting American advice, so that he began to be perceived as an American “patsy” in a country that was becoming increasingly nationalistic. We made the mistake of leaning on him to get everything that we had been unable to get from Rhee. This was certainly an ingredient in the situation. By March and April, the Chang administration began to talk back to the Americans. Marshall Green sent in a recommendation to Washington, cautioning us to be careful about our continuing and increasing demands. He was absolutely right.

Q: What was the role of the American military in 1961? Were they too supportive of the Korean military, as some have alleged? Did you find yourself in between a right-left battle in the American Congress?

MACDONALD: Very much so. I don't know which of the American military knew in advance of the coup. I have some suspicions that some did, although none ever told me so. A number of the military were very supportive of the coup. They perceived the Korean situation as anarchical and chaotic and greatly weakened in its fight against Communism. They thought it was a good thing that it straightened out. On the other hand, you had people like Ed Wagner at Harvard, who was writing articles berating government policy for supporting this awful dictatorship. I was being called by both sides all the time.

Q: What did McConaughy finally instruct you to do?

MACDONALD: Eventually, the titular head of the coup, Chang Do-Young, who was not the head at all, issued a statement on behalf of the junta, laying out five or six principles, including the eventual return to civilian government. I wrote the U.S. government commentary acquiescing in that, stressing those aspects we thought important. That was our first public announcement. I was so upset by the absence of any response to Seoul of any kind that finally I went home and phoned Marshall Green myself. He didn't talk to me, but the Consul, Tom Mayfield (whom I knew) was called up to take the call. I identified myself as Smith, hoping he would recognize my voice. I told him that we wanted the

Embassy to understand that we were in full support of it. As far as I know, that is the only communication that the Embassy received for three or four days. That was disgraceful. I kept drafting messages, but could never get them approved.

Q: What was the problem?

MACDONALD: At that time, the NSC didn't enter into my calculations at all. The Department under Dean Rusk was running affairs. But I received no direction from the Secretary. I don't know to this day what kind, if any, “back-channel” messages there may have been. I certainly never saw any of them.

Q: You were the country director until 1962. By then, I assume that we had become accustomed to the military government.

MACDONALD: It was made clear in the instructions that the task force worked out for Berger that he was going to work with the government to the extent that the government showed itself responsive to our requirements. Berger received jurisdiction over the AID mission and brought in new leadership and trimmed the staff. He took a stand towards the Koreans; instead of holding their hands and instructing them what do to in minute detail, they were told to come with a plan, which we would approve and monitor. We were not to be bothered with the details. This along with the new talent they mobilized were responsible for the Korean growth. It was essentially a step-by-step process of accommodation on both sides. That was still developing when I left the desk. After I left, did it develop that Park Chung Hee was going to constitute a civilian government, but his generals got to him and he decided that it was too early. We told him it was too late. Finally they did.

Q: In the 1975-77 period you became an international relations officer.

MACDONALD: What I actually did was in effect run the US-Korea Joint Committee on the Status of US Forces. In that capacity, my title was Executive Secretary of the Committee—

there was also a Korean Executive Secretary. He is now the DCM at the Korean Embassy here. It was pretty much left to me in consultation with him to determine the procedure, set the meetings, determine the agenda, arrange the documentation, see to it that all was signed, sealed and delivered, and to make sure that people showed up for the meetings. I had a staff of six or seven people to help me. We were the official archives of these proceedings.

During the period I was the Executive Secretary, the Committee met quite regularly on a whole series of issues focusing on for example the problem of the Korean border villages near Army posts—crime, corruption, prostitution, the violence, etc. We discussed how to control these adverse factors with due sensitivity for both sides. Then there were a whole series of real estate questions where we wanted certain parcels and the Koreans wanted others. They insisted that we turn certain real estate back to them. Then there was the question of utility rates, which was a big question because electricity was a large US Forces cost. During much of my time, we were hassling over what utility rates should be charged. Then there were labor problems—Korean employees of the US forces. And then there were contract problems, black market and the leakage of PX goods into the market. The only issue we did not involve ourselves in any detail was the question of criminal jurisdiction over U.S. offenders because by tacit agreement that was managed between the Judge Advocate of the US forces—theoretically under the Joint Committee—and a counterpart of his in the Korean Ministry of Justice. Other than that, the whole range of problems involving a group of uniformed foreigners living in Korea came before the Committee.

Q: You have now seen Korea through every phase since the end of World War II. How did you see the Park Chung Hee government in the mid 70s?

MACDONALD: The Park Chung Hee government until 1972 was a very good thing for Korea. It was bad in the sense that it interrupted the train of logical constitutional evolution of Korean politics, but the Koreans don't worry so much about that as we do. In terms

of giving the government a discipline, a capability and a sense of mission, it brought to Korea some desperately needed attributes that had been almost absent prior to that. Rhee had no sense of economics at all. He thought it happens by itself. Furthermore, he had the old Confucian attitude that economics really don't matter and that business is not a respectable profession. Park Chung Hee was not persuaded that democratic representative government was what Korea needed, but he was persuaded that Korea needed to evolve a better political system. To some extent, he was trying to do that up until 1971. After that, it was all down-hill and Park unfortunately fell into the same mold of so many that preceded him both in Korea and elsewhere. He was cut off from his people; he began to think that only he knew what was right, etc. That wound up with his assassination.

The appraisal of the Park Government has to be mixed. On the whole the good outweighs the bad, but there was a lot of bad, particularly at the end.

Q: How did you see the relationships between the American four-star general and the Ambassador during this period?

MACDONALD: It was still uneasy. Actually, one of the points of friction was the activity I was involved in. The Embassy obviously had a keen interest in the Status of Forces because it was a diplomatic problem. It had a representative on the Committee, but I had to be terribly careful in my dealings with the Embassy so that the military would not think I was betraying them. One of my most unpleasant moments there was when I tried to get Embassy support for a position that I thought was correct. When I went to the General I was reporting to—a three star Air Force General—he was absolutely furious that I had been at the Embassy to mobilize support. He gave me a lecture on military responsibility and whom I worked for.

Q: Of course, we had a strong Ambassador—Richard Sneider—there at the time. Who were the Generals?

MACDONALD: Stilwell and Vessey.

Q: Did the Singlaub issue arise when you were there?

MACDONALD: Yes, it did. The Singlaub episode—he was the Chief of Staff of the 8th Army and was about third or fourth in the line of command—was not a question of civilian-military friction—certainly not in Seoul. It was created by Jimmy Carter's campaign pledge that he would withdraw American ground forces from Korea. This bothered everybody. Obviously, Singlaub went much further than anybody else in taking a position against withdrawal. He was supposed to be loyally carrying out the orders of the Commander-in-Chief. After his repeated outbursts, he was transferred and subsequently resigned. Although some thought he had gone too far, everybody agreed with the views he expressed.

Q: Did the Carter plan, which I believe was drawn up in response to our experience in Vietnam, have any merit?

MACDONALD: Not in the way it was done. It made absolutely no sense at all. There had of course been a previous withdrawal in 1971. Following the Korean War, we left two divisions in Korea. One was withdrawn in 1971. There was a similar concern then, but the 1971 withdrawal was accomplished much better. It was done in consultation with the Koreans. Although the Koreans recognized that we would be withdrawing the division in any case, they were at least given time allowing President Park to invite the division to leave, which saved his and the Koreans' “face”. That was not the case in 1976-77. Carter's campaign pledge had obviously been inspired by the “peaceniks” with whom the Koreans had very little sympathy. This was just another illustration for Park of the topsy-turvy world in which he was living which had begun with the Nixon-Kissinger visit to China, the Guam doctrine and all the other actions that completely changed the face of East Asia. Carter's declaration did enormous political damage and in a sense we will never recover from it. On the other hand, I do think based on my own experience as Korean desk officer, that

once the military take a position, they are likely to hold it against all odds, no matter what. They are not about to volunteer pulling out American forces irrespective of the objective pro and con arguments. I think they need to be prodded a little. But Carter's judgment was precipitate, ill informed and he himself reversed the policy.

It makes a great deal more sense to talk about this issue in 1990 than it did in 1976. One can argue that if it hadn't been for that dreadful period of 1976-77, we would have an easier time doing it now. But the Koreans, for good reason, are less trustful of us now then they were then.

I would like to add as a last thought that on the whole in my experience, the American Embassy in Korea has done a pretty good job. Its reports have been well received in Washington, although not always acted upon. There have been ups and downs. The Embassy is frequently criticized when I visit Korea now, as a ghetto of non-Korean speaking Americans who just have parties with each other. I think there have been times when that charge has had a certain amount of truth to it. I don't think that is the case now.

Q: On behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and its oral history program, I would like to thank you for your time and effort. It has been very interesting.

End of interview